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Statement by Cardinal O Fiaich of 21 May, 1981.

I offer my deep sympathy to the parents and family of Raymond McCreesh. During recent weeks they have borne their pain and grief with exemplary fortitude. May the Lord have mercy on the soul of the deceased and on the souls of all who have lost their lives in the northern troubles.

The death of Raymond McCreesh, exemplifies the cruel dilemma in which northern Catholics are caught. I shared the family's joy in 1973 when an t-Ath Brian (Fr. Brian McCreesh) was ordained priest for this diocese. It would be unthinkable of me, therefore, not to be willing to share their burden now in the hour of their greatest need.

Raymond McCreesh was born in a community which has always openly proclaimed that it is Irish, not British. When the northern troubles began he was barely 12, a very impressionable age at which to learn of discrimination. Those who protested peacefully against it were harassed and intimidated. Then followed Burntollet, the Bogside, Bombay Street, and Bloody Sunday in Derry, all before he was 15. These events gave rise to very deep emotions in Nationalist areas. Sectarian murders in Co. Armagh made many young Catholics and Protestants easy recruits for paramilitary organisations.

I repudiate unequivocally this recourse to arms but I well remember how easy it was in the mid 70s for many young men on both sides to become convinced that this was the best way to defend their own community. Raymond McCreesh was captured bearing arms at the age of 19 and sentenced to 14 years imprisonment. I have no doubt that he would never have seen the inside of a jail but for the abnormal political situation. Who is entitled to pronounce him a murderer or a suicide? I leave his judgement to a just and merciful judge.

In near desperation I appeal to both sides for the fifth time for a compromise which would bring the hunger-strike to an end. If the hunger-strikers continue with their "all or nothing" policy it will shortly lead to the death of a fourth young man.

If the Government continues its rigid stance on prison dress and work it will ultimately be faced with the wrath of the whole Nationalist population. Already Government policy has provided the IRA with its greatest influx of recruits since Bloody Sunday and has left some sections of our youth so alienated that they no longer pay much attention to the denunciations of violence.

Let this young man's death be followed not by violence, arson or intimidation but by sympathy with his family and by prayers on a wide scale for his soul and for the soul of all who have died. Any repetition of the disgraceful events which followed the death of earlier hunger-strikers would be a deadly blow to the morale of the people. South Armagh must never again witness the horrifying carnage of this week which left immeasurable grief and sadness in the five English homes. This revolting deed shames us all. There are broken hearts, too, in many Protestant homes in our local community as well as in Catholic ones. We must recognise the grief in the faces of these fellow Christians and fellow Irishmen and women and strive to heal their wounds in the spirit of mutual acceptance, forgiveness and love.

Gaeilgeoir líofa a bhí i Reamonn Mac Raois. Go dtuga Dia suimneas síoraí dá anam, agus sólás dá mhuintir a d'fhág sé faoi bhrón ina dhiaidh. A dhia na glóire, tri idir ghuí do mháthair beannaithe, bronn an síocháin ar phobal no h-Éireann, thuaidh agus theas.